

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Vol. 2, No.1, Spring/Summer 2012

URN: urn:nbn:de:gbv:547-201200116

Reshaping the Hegemony: State-Owned Media in Egypt after the Revolution

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Abstract: The popular revolution in Egypt has proven that the state-owned media was far from being the public opinion's shaper. Yet, it was the sole arena where intellectuals – or rather 'confirmed' intellectuals – could exchange views, shape the hegemonic discourse and dictate the consensus, according to the regime's parameters. That media, and especially the printed press, had crystallized the Egyptian intellectual elite, which by its mere association with the regime has alienated itself from any counter-elite or counter public. Its legitimacy and status stemmed mostly from its political affiliation.

My argument is that the survival of the state-owned media after the revolution is not just about functionality, but rather about the survivability of an elite that cannot be replaced. This elite has certainly 'to pay a price' for its betrayal, blindness, lack of courage and neglect. It has to be born again in the same arena where it had committed its 'intellectual crimes' and to create a new hegemonic discourse in the same sphere where the previous regime had corrupted the discourse.

However, it is not just about punishing and redeeming the old elites. It is about legitimizing the new discourse that is being created by the revolutionary public. As if the adoption of the new discourse by the state's media will be the ultimate symbol of its acceptance.

In my paper, I intend to show the extent of adoption of the new discourse, and the changes in roles of the state's media in legitimizing the new discourse.

Keywords: Legitimacy, new media, Egypt, revolution, state-owned media

Introduction

"The Arab media was dependent, restricted and government-run, whose only task was to draw a false, improved image of the prevailing misery and suffering. Hence, the crisis in the Arab media stems from the Arab political system as a whole...Today, the government-run media no longer has any influence or role, or even a future", commented Abdullah Rashid, a columnist for the Abu Dhabi based *Al-Ittihad* newspaper.¹

¹ Rashid, A. (2006) The Imminent Collapse of the Controlled Media. In: *Arab Media in the*

If Rashid was correct, why is it that the demonstrators in Tahrir square were not demanding the closure of the state-owned media in Egypt? Why has the state's National Democratic Party been dissolved while its media apparatus is still intact? What is the state-owned media's function in a time when the alternative, or the new media, is celebrating its victory?

The printed press in Egypt could be divided into three major sections: government-owned press (or, *national* press), partisan press and privately own press. Although this division implies a competitive public sphere, it is important to understand that all press media are subject to government's approval through the Supreme Press Council. The Council was first established in 1975 by president Anwar al-Sadat, but had served for two years before being suspended, to be re-established in 1981 and it continues to function to this day.

The Supreme Press Council is composed of the editors-in- chief and the board of chairmen of both the national and party papers, other heads of media agencies and a number of "public figures concerned with the press affairs" to be appointed by the *Shura* council (the upper house in the parliament). The Supreme Press Council is also the only government organ that has the authority to issue licenses of operation to the media. The *Shura* council is also the owner (51 percent) of the *national* newspapers, which were nationalized already in 1960 by the late president Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Hence, the *Shura* council that was created in 1980, is not only the legal owner of the five *national* printed media publishing houses (which are in fact huge conglomerates), it has also the power to approve, suspend or abolish the operation of any private, partisan or governmental newspaper.

Since 1977, political parties were allowed to operate and to establish their own newspapers. However, they would need first to be approved as parties by the Political Parties Committee, which is chaired by the president of the *Shura* council, who chairs also the Supreme Press Council. Further, no journalist can practice his profession without an appropriate license from the Supreme Press Council.²

This structured chain of control, in addition to draconian press laws, ensured not only the obedience of all media to the state apparatus; it has marked the boundaries of the tolerated public discourse through its appointments of editors-in-chief and chairmen of boards of directors of the government-owned press, and through its power to ban partisan and privately owned media.³

These were the legal and the bureaucratic circumstances in Egypt when on January 18th, just a week before the historic demonstrations took place at Tahrir square in Cairo, Safwat al-Sharif, the chairman of the *Shura* council had promulgated the

Information Age. The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, pp. 584-585.

² For further details about the role of the Supreme Press Council and its powers see Fandy, M. (2007). *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World*. Westport and London: Praeger Security International.

³ For an extensive description of the state's apparatus and laws that limited the freedom of speech and the limits of public discourse see Kienle, E. (2000): *A Grand Delusion, Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

resolution to prolong the tenure of four chairmen of boards of directors of the government-owned printed press. These were Dr. Abd al-Mun'im Sa'id of *al-Ahram*, Abd al-Qadir Shahib of *Dar al-Hilal*, Isma'il Mustafa Muntasir of *Dar al-Ma'arif* and *October* and Muhsin Mahmud Bahgat of the National Company for Distribution. The resolution included also extending the tenure of seven editors-in-chief and the appointment of five new editors-in-chief and some new members to the managing councils of few of the major government-owned newspapers and magazines (*Shuruq*, January 1, 2011).⁴

Few weeks later, Yahya al-Gamal, the then chairman of the Supreme Council of Press (to become later the deputy of the newly appointed prime minister Issam Sharaf), declared that the new appointments are suspended until a new government is appointed. On March 30th, the new prime minister, Dr. Issam Sharaf had promulgated a new decree (no.451 for the year 2011) which included the appointments of new chairmen for the boards of directors of the five governmental newspapers and new editors-in-chief.

The preamble of the new decree states that:

'in the framework of reconstructing and reorganizing the press sector, to adjust it with the spirit of change and in compliance with the demands of the current stage that faces Egypt, and for the sake of building a society of freedom, democracy and social justice...the prime minister(Issam Sharaf) had decided to promulgate the following decree (Media in Egypt, 30/3/2011).'⁵

The *spirit of change*, and the *demands of the current stage*, have been perceived at first as personal changes. These changes had to include everyone who took part in Mubarak's regime, from Mubarak himself to the Prime Minister down to the editors-in-chief of the government's media. Yet, the personal changes were just the beginning. They were coupled with changes in contents, starting with a new vocabulary, a different attitude towards the protesters, and a new perception of the role of the government's media. However, one could conclude that the core idea that government-owned media are counter to any free journalism perception has not changed yet.

Moreover, senior writers, who have represented the top echelon of Egypt's public intellectuals, are still writing in the government-owned print press, expressing their newly adjusted views that conform with the *spirit of change* while trying to maintain their position as public opinion shapers. Although it may look like an inherent contradiction, that 'intellectual servants of the regime' or 'regime's intellectuals' as they were tagged before the revolution, are leading the 'change', it is interesting to observe to what extent they thrive to become the voice of the revolution. Further, they may even grant the government's press new legitimacy and even become representatives of the revolution inside the government, thus granting the revolution a formal entrance into the state's hegemony.

⁴ <http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=378170>.

⁵ <http://www.mediainegypt.com/2011/03/new-media-leaders-and-seniors.html>.

During the months of the revolution in Egypt and elsewhere, many analyses and comments have addressed the impact of the new media on the revolution. There is no doubt about the importance of *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and the like as mobilizing platforms. However, it is difficult if not impossible to determine the extent of these media's contribution to the dissemination of ideas and the crystallization of the revolutionary discourse. It is true that the revolutionary elites like youth leaders, Muslim Brotherhood leaders or formal opposition movements and parties, have used the web to promote their agenda and to mobilize a counter-public. However, their debates and argumentations were conducted against the 'regime's voice' as it was published in the state's media. Hence, it was an intellectual clash between a perceived 'monopoly' and the contenders where the platforms were less important.

In fact, the public sphere itself, although utilizing the limitless web, was limited by the extent of accessibility, and by the nature and status of the active participants and their social affiliation. Thus, the more educated and organized elites could utilize all the new media devices, while the lower echelons made do with cell phones or, in the best cases, hookup up into the web in internet cafés.

It is therefore still a competition about legitimacy and legitimization, than a competition between platforms. In fact, it is a rivalry between elites who had monopolized the legitimacy and their rivals who hold now the key for legitimacy.

The Sphere of Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an intricate issue when it concerns the Arab media, since legitimacy is not a result of a free, competitive debate in an ideal, Habermasian public sphere. Abdulla Rashid defines the Arab media as "the guardian of the people", that is based on the government approach that the people are not mature enough to understand life.⁶ His conclusion therefore, is that the public has surrendered to "the whims of the state-controlled media", thus avoiding any meaningful public debate which would issue a consensual legitimacy.

It is not within the scope of this paper to analyze the Arab public sphere; however, Rashid's observation implies that theories concerning legitimacy in the public sphere need to be carefully screened before applying them in the Arab public sphere. Thus, for example, it would be far too ambitious to engage Piers Robinson's (2002) analysis on the "CNN effect", which concerns the influence of the media on the regime's decisions, in order to understand the debacle of the Egyptian media concerning its legitimacy. Robinson draws on Hallin's (1986) 'spheres' theory, which tries to establish different modes of coverage by the media. These are the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate contention and the sphere of deviance.⁷ These spheres could also be perceived as the spheres where

⁶ Rashid, 2006, p. 586.

⁷ Hallin, D. (1986). *The Uncensored war: the Media in Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University

the legitimacy of the press and of the state is produced.

Indeed, Robinson's theory on the relations between policy and media, and media-state interaction, where he divides that interaction into four modes of operation, defines also what could be depicted as the 'arena of legitimacy'.⁸ However, when the media operate within a 'sphere of consensus', or within elite dissent, or when the media operate within a 'sphere of legitimate controversy' (using Hallin's term), there is an embedded pivotal premise which is critical to the theory. Robinson's assumption is that not only the controversy is legitimate, but also that the consensus itself has been developed through legitimate means, and has not been forced by the state, as it is the case in many Arab states.

Theoretically, in the Egyptian case, it seems convenient to adopt Suchman's definition of institutional legitimacy, where "legitimacy and institutionalization are virtually synonymous. Both phenomena empower organizations primarily by making them seem natural and meaningful".⁹ However, in the Egyptian case the institutionalization of the press was the major cause of its de-legitimization. As long as the regime was perceived as illegitimate so were its organs. The press' attachment to the government by ownership relations meant also that the legitimacy could not be established independently from the hegemonic discourse that the government aimed to impose.

It would be perhaps more useful to look into the legitimacy dilemma from a different aspect. Tilling (2004) suggests a double-layer legitimacy theory: the institutional legitimacy and the organizational legitimacy.¹⁰ Referring to organizational legitimacy, Mathews suggests the following definition :

"Organizations seek to establish congruence between the social values associated with or implied by their activities and the norms of acceptable behaviour in the larger social system in which they are a part. In so far as these two value systems are congruent we can speak of organizational legitimacy. When an actual or potential disparity exists between the two value systems there will exist a threat to organizational legitimacy."¹¹

Hence, seeking legitimacy is an ongoing process where the organizations need to be alert and to watch for any change in the cultural and political environment. Hence, Mathews' definition fits well into the Egyptian government-owned press. It implies that this kind of press can no longer claim to be the navigator of public opinion, it has to relinquish its hegemonic status and to be attentive to what the public is shouting at Tahrir square if it wants to develop its new legitimacy.

In my paper, I will focus on the changes that the government-owned print press is

Press.

⁸ Robinson, P.(2002). *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention*. London: Routledge, p.31.

⁹ Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 576.

¹⁰ Tilling, M. V. (2004). Refinements to Legitimacy Theory in Social and Environmental Accounting. Commerce Research Paper Series No. 04-6. URL : <http://www.flinders.edu.au/sabs/business-files/research/papers/2004/04-6.pdf>.

¹¹ Mathews, M. R. (1993) *Socially Responsible Accounting*. London: Chapman & Hall, p.350.

going through since the revolution, the new political vocabulary that it has adopted and its struggle to maintain its status in times of change. Further, my argument is that the state-owned press and 'its' intellectuals, while deriving their legitimacy from supporting the revolution and by 'clearing' their past as regime supporters, are granting the revolution and 'its' intellectuals additional weight.

Admit and Repent

"Millions hit the streets in support of Mubarak" shouted the shining red headline of the government-owned *al-Ahram* newspaper (*al-Ahram*, February, 3 2011)¹². The date was February 3rd. Eight days later, on top of the paper's logo, the headline said it all: "The people toppled the regime" (*al-Ahram*, February 12, 2011) combined with a picture spread all over the width of the paper that showed a young Egyptian waving his hands above his head in a victorious expression, surrounded by a huge crowd that hoisted Egypt's flags.¹³

In both editions, the editor was Osama Saraya and the chairman of the board of directors was Abd al-Mon'im Sa'id, one of Egypt's prominent intellectuals, a world renowned researcher and a brave critic of the regime. Both were to be replaced a few weeks later by Labib al-Siba'i as head of the managing council and Abd al-Azim Hammad as the editor-in-chief.

In addition to the sudden change of the editorial approach toward the revolution and the demonstrators, *al-Ahram* had decided on February 9th to publish a special supplement under the name "the supplement of Tahrir Youth " (*mulhak shabab al-tahrir*) the first of its kind, in which the paper granted full support to the demonstrators and praised the civil movement.

In an interview to *al-Ahram Weekly* (the English edition of the publishing house) Mohammad al-Barghouti, the editor of the supplement, explained that "Changes in *Al-Ahram's* editorial policy came hand in hand with the production of the supplement. The banner of the newspaper read the word 'revolution' for the first time on Tuesday 9 February, the day we issued the supplement"¹⁴. Inside *al-Ahram's* editorial board a bitter debate took place around the question whether the paper should apologize to its readers about its coverage of revolutionary events thus far. An apology was not issued, instead, a decision was taken to provide a 'more balanced' coverage of the events. An example for the meaning of 'balanced' could be found in the way that the paper had described the first Tahrir demonstrations on January 26th. A short news item on the first page read, "thousands have participated in peaceful demonstrations in Cairo and the districts", but it was not the Tahrir square demonstration that the paper intended to describe. The headline was dedicated to the huge demonstrations in Lebanon

¹² http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45349.

¹³ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45358.

¹⁴ El-Bey, Doaa, *Change of Hearts*, Al-Ahram weekly, issue 1035, 19-23 February, 2011.

(*al-Ahram*, January 26, 2011)¹⁵. A day later, the paper had dedicated its headline to the number of dead and injured 'balancing' between 118 injured civilians and 162 police officers (*al-Ahram*, 27 January, 2011)¹⁶. It was not until February the 2nd that the paper had changed its tone, and from describing in its headlines what the government was doing and how the president and his aides were responding, it switched to covering positively the new phenomenon. "A million-participant demonstration is demanding a change," said the headline on that day, and four inside-pages were dedicated to cover the different blocs of the participants (*al-Ahram*, February 2, 2011)¹⁷. Yet, on February the 3rd the 'balance' was shifted again when the first page headline read "millions went out in support of Mubarak" (*al-Ahram*, February 3, 2011).¹⁸ In the next few days, it was quite clear from the headlines and the subtitles that the editors were torn between their administrative and formal loyalty to the government and their professional and perhaps their personal priorities.

A sharper, and perhaps a more agonizing change of hearts, could be found in *al-Gomhuriya*, the fervent pro-regime newspaper, which was founded in 1954 to serve as the "voice of the revolution" of the Free Officers that took place two years earlier. The paper, which is part of *Dar al-Tahrir*, a government-owned publishing house, had declared an open war with the demonstrators. On January 26th its front page headline stated: "the demonstrators blocked the roads and created havoc in Tahrir square", the subtitle read "elements of the banned [Muslim Brotherhood movement] were among the 10 thousand congregated... [they] threw stones and tore down fixtures" (*al-Gomhuriya*, January 26, 2011)¹⁹. On February 12th a mocking cartoon on its front page depicted the demonstrators as long-necked participants striving to attract a TV photographers and the caption read "I see that they have extended the necks of all Egyptians" (*al-Gomhuriya*, February, 12, 2011).²⁰ It was not until February 13th when the paper printed the dramatic headline "the sun of freedom had shined and the owners of millions [of dollars] are falling" (*al-Gomhuriya*, February 13, 2011).²¹ From that date on the paper went all out against the regime and referred to the revolution as a "real, loyal revolution" (*al-Gomhuriya*, February 13, 2011)²².

Two months later, in March 25th, the editor of "Youth of Tahrir", *al-Ahram's* special supplement, was asked if the supplement was published in order to make-up *al-Ahram's* image or out of embarrassment. Al-Barghouti replied "from its incipience the supplement was supporting the demands of the revolution and we had demanded Mubarak's resignation even before he resigned". As for the future of *al-Ahram*, he added:

¹⁵ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45341.

¹⁶ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45342.

¹⁷ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45348.

¹⁸ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/index.aspx?cal=1&ID=45349.

¹⁹ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/algomhuria/today/pdf/>.

²⁰ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/12/GM1.pdf>.

²¹ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/13/GM1.pdf>.

²² <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/13/GM1.pdf>.

"The paper is a national paper and it will remain as such. Al-Ahram was kidnapped by the regime for its benefit like the rest of Egypt before the revolution. I admit that there were mistakes committed before and during the revolution...we have excellent journalists some of whom were murdered professionally by the previous regimes who turned the journalists into representatives of the ministries"(Majalat al-Shabab, March 25, 2011) .²³

The apologetic attitude, which could be defined as 'admit and repent', is typical in times of change. Victor Turner's "anti-structure" definition of a post revolution period is of course a useful theory.²⁴ Yet one should be careful when applying Turner's definition to the situation in Egypt. Indeed, the world is turned upside down, however, old rules still apply. Peterson's (2011) analysis, according to which the media's "institutional roles - their relations with the state and communities of reader/viewers - may be abruptly changed" is also only partly applicable.²⁵ Suffice is to notice that the government-owned press did not change its ownership, nor did it abandon its senior writers, even its former editors continue to contribute articles and analyses or work as consultants. Further, the state's political infrastructure, though personally changed, is still intact and even in a more authoritarian fashion than in the time of Mubarak. On April 30th, the military is still in power and the state-owned media has to cater to its dictates, as much as any other licensed media. No new press law has been promulgated and censorship is still forced, although, as it will be discussed later, self-censorship has adopted new features.

Instead of comparing the press in a 'before and after' fashion, I would suggest to add an additional period, a 'meantime', where the change is taking place but it is not settled yet.

What is happening in this 'meantime'?

Exchange of Legitimacy

The beginning of the 'meantime' in Egypt's state-owned press can be attributed to the first days of February 2011. These were the days when editors – not yet replaced – have started to dictate a new policy of news coverage, and a new editorial trend. However, the major problem that is facing those newspapers is not only how to adjust to the new political developments, but how to gain legitimacy. The inherent contradiction between being state-owned publications and trying to demonstrate some sort of professional independence seems impossible to settle. Yet, as the new temporary regime, including the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces that is running the country's affairs, were supportive of the revolution, and as the political arena is going through the same 'meantime' phase, it is less a dilemma of contents. It is not how to cover the developments that troubled the

²³ <http://shabab.ahram.org.eg/mag/Inner.aspx?ContentID=4444&typeid=1>.

²⁴ Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New Jersey: Aldine.

²⁵ Peterson, M. A. (2011). Egypt's Media Ecology in a Time of Revolution. *Arab Media Society*. Issue 13, http://www.arabmediasociety.com/articles/downloads/20110531103710_Peterson.pdf

editors, but rather how to shed the papers' historic image and establish a new legitimate one. In effect, it is not only the papers as institutes that have to face the new era but the previous 'state's intellectuals' who need to build a new status for themselves if they were to participate in the new discourse, let alone shaping it.

However, such requirements mean also that the state's press needs to detach itself from its provider, to reestablish itself as private organizations and to compete in a rough market where it used to have the upper hand.

Mohammad Shouman, an Egyptian writer, had suggested a far-reaching prescription for the government press in order to achieve its legitimacy. He stressed, among others, the need of the media to detach itself from any political or economic regime; its finances have to be transparent; all governmental organs, like the Supreme Press Council, that oversee the press in general and the government press in particular, have to be abolished, and "to turn the government-owned media into real public institutions...that represent all components of the society". Shouman suggests even that the employees of these media will choose their editors and half of the members of their boards-of-directors; the other half will be nominated by the parliament where each elected party will be entitled to one member at the board while one member will represent the independently elected members.²⁶

However, Shouman's recommendations refer mostly to the structural change that the government-owned press has to adopt, while Mathews emphasizes the need for an 'organizational legitimacy' that relies on a new discourse between the press and its clientele. It should be noticed that while legitimacy and credibility are interconnected, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the credibility of the government-owned newspapers, before or after the revolution, but to explore the efforts of these newspapers to gain legitimacy. I would also subscribe to Tilling's observation according to which "legitimacy itself is an abstract concept, given reality by multiple actors in the social environment".²⁷

The important question is therefore, who grants legitimacy and what are the criteria for granting legitimacy to the government-owned papers. Interestingly, even after the revolution, outstanding Egyptian intellectuals perceive the government-owned press not only as a 'natural phenomenon', but also as a necessary 'public organ' that should be corrected, restructured and adjust its contents, however, it should not be privatized.²⁸ The ideological reason behind this

²⁶ Shouman, M. (2011). Mustaqbal al-i'lam al-masri baa'd al-thaurah(The Future of the Egyptian Media after the Revolution). *al-Hayat*, 8 June.

²⁷ Tilling, M. V. (2004). Refinements to Legitimacy Theory in Social and Environmental Accounting. Commerce Research Paper Series No. 04-6. URL : <http://www.flinders.edu.au/sabs/business-files/research/papers/2004/04-6.pdf>.

²⁸ See for example the suggestions that Dr. Muna Hadidi offered at the 'national dialogue' that took place between Media personalities and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces on June 7th 2011. She said among others that "we have to define the roles of the national and the private media... the duty of the national media (referring to the official TV channels) is to guard the nation's stability and to protect it (*al-Youm al-Sab'i*, June 8, 2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=431017&>.

argument is that “the national press belongs to the people and not to the government” as Gamal Fahmy, a senior member of the Syndicate of Journalists, argued (*al-Youm al-Sab'i*, August 26, 2011).²⁹ A more practical reason is that many of the state's newspapers are partly owned by businessmen and even editors. The fear is that privatization might transfer the ownership to the same old guard that will adhere to the same old loyalties, thus serving the old regime through a new business structure.

If Fahmy's argument expresses the opinion of the mainstream intelligentsia, one may assume also, that it is this part of the Egyptian intelligentsia – and not the public – that will take upon itself to judge the legitimacy of the 'national' press. Yet, drawing on Muna Hadidi's vague prescription that this press will have “to serve the people's interests and the stability of the state”, by definition, it is the state and not the intelligentsia that will define the parameters of these interests. These interests would be articulated, then, by the state's media and be expected to be emulated by the rest of the media.

However, it is not a one-way track. The 'meantime' period has proved that the interim regime is listening to the public's voice and attending to its demands. In this period, it is the non-governmental media that is conveying the public's sentiment, while the government's media is following suit. Since it is the regime, ahead of the media, that has to gain legitimacy, it is from the regime's conduct that its media draws its own legitimacy. Thus, as long as the regime is responsive to the revolutionaries' demands, its organs, including the press, will be able to maintain their legitimacy.

In other words, the new counter-hegemonic discourse that has been produced at Tahrir square would need to be adopted by the regime, thus becoming the new hegemonic discourse that would grant 'official' legitimacy not only to the regime's media but also to the non-governmental press. Further, receiving a positive nod from the regime for adopting the new discourse, and by abiding to the regime's directives and adjusting itself to the new discourse, the regime's media would be able to radiate its new legitimacy back to the regime, and, to the revolutionary movements.

Creating Legitimacy

Reestablishing its new legitimacy is a long and painful path. As long as the old press laws are enforced, reshuffles at the boards-of-directors and appointing new editors will not be enough. It is the fashion of the coverage and the content of the news along with opinion articles that would make the difference. Already in February new headline phrases were used to describe the events, followed by a new vocabulary. Most strikingly is the usage of the title "the ousted president" or rather "the extracted president" (*al-makhlu'*) to depict Mubarak's new status. In many cases the government-owned papers have begun to use just the title "the ousted"

²⁹ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=481140>.

(*al-makhlū'*) in a derogatory fashion, omitting the presidential title. The more important change is the omission of the title "the banned" (*al-mahzurah*) from the Muslim Brotherhood's title.

These are far from being mere semantic changes. In the past decades, the term *al-mahzurah* had been used not only by state-owned newspaper but also by some of the formal opposition newspapers that belonged to licensed opposition parties. Thus subscribing to the hegemonic dictate that has defined the Brotherhood as a national menace and that no nationalist entity should befriend by using its official title.

In January 2007, it was President Mubarak who had defined the Brotherhood as a

"danger on the national security because it adopts a religious ideology...if we assume that this movement will rise, we might experience the same developments which are not far from us, where regimes are representing the political Islam, thus imposing seclusion on themselves and on their people".³⁰

Mubarak had explained in several occasions that the Muslim Brothers or any party that runs on a religious platform is in direct clash with his idea of civil society.

Not so was the view of the activists of civil society towards the Brothers. The new generation of students, bloggers and activists who had laid the infrastructure for the revolution to come, have considered the Brothers as possible partners who share the same aim. Mustafa Muhi al-Din, a socialist activist from Helwan University had described thus his relations with the Brothers at the university:

"They invite us to their events, and they show interest in our activities. Maybe the union here is still not strong, but there is space for activities. We can be active and spread our message, worrying about state security, but not about hassles from the Brotherhood, and sometimes they give us a hand. We do the same. This makes things easier."

This description is supported by Abd al-Aziz Mugahid, a Brotherhood activist in the same university:

"The socialists intervened to help us out in solidarity demonstrations with our sisters who were expelled from the dormitories because they wore the *niqab*, and they stood by us when the administration expelled more than 400 students for security reasons. These joint activities were not frequent before."³¹

Beside the operational aspect of the cooperation between the Brothers and their secular, leftist or non-aligned cohorts, this cooperation represents also a process of mutual legitimization. According to Mubarak's definition of the Brothers, for the non-religious groups, to embrace the Brothers as partners was tantamount to treason. Likewise, for the Brothers, given their history with the leftists, to cooperate with the socialist students could be tagged as extreme diversion.

However, the mutual legitimization process stood as a counterweight to both the

³⁰ Interview with president Mubarak, *Al-Usbu'*, January 11, 2007

³¹ Both quotes are taken from el-Hamalawi, H. (2007). *Comrades and Brothers. Middle East Report*. Vol. 242 <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer242/comrades-brothers>.

accusation of the regime that the *mahzurah* is a national menace, and to the cooperation between the opposition parties with the hegemonic discourse.

Thus, the Muslim Brothers have evolved into a litmus test for every movement that claimed to represent the demand for toppling the regime and to achieve democracy. As though whoever was against Mubarak and his regime had to support the Brothers' participation in the political sphere, to legalize their activities, and to erase the organization's *al-mahzurah* title. To be for the brothers' participation meant to be with the progressive, pro-revolution trends, while to defy the Brothers' inclusion, meant to support Mubarak and his dictated discourse.

The government-owned media, in its search for legitimacy, understood from the outset that it would have to change its approach towards the Brothers, if it wants to reestablish its shattered legitimacy. In fact, to omit *al-mahzurah* from the organization's title is equal to depicting the Mubarak as *al-mahlu'*. One could not go without the other if the official papers are to be legitimized. This does not mean that the papers have to support the Brothers ideology, but that the Brother's political framework is as legitimate as that of the non-religious revolutionary movements. Both, the Brothers and the secular revolutionary movements have achieved then the power to bestow legitimacy on the regime and its organs including its newspapers.³²

Hence, an innovative vocabulary had to be introduced in the official papers in order to change their depiction of the demonstrators. From inciters and criminals (*muharid'un*) 'who seek to destroy the country', or, 'suspicious movements' (*taharukat mashbuhah*) (*al-Gomhuriya*, January 28, 2011)³³ to differentiating between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. The 'good' being "our youth who protected the museum from being robbed" and the 'bad' were "groups who specialize in robbery and firing and creating havoc" as *al-Gomhuriya* reporters had described the demonstrators. Needless to add, the Muslim Brotherhood was still tagged as *al-mahzurah* on January 26th, one day after the big demonstrations in Tahrir square.

On February 10th, one day before Mubarak's resignation, *al-Gomhuriya* had finally 'granted' the Brotherhood its 'legitimate' status: *al-mahzurah* ceased from being used in the paper that took pride in never using the organization's official name.

It was not until February that *al-Gomhuriya* had started to make its shift from first mocking the demonstrators then reprimanding them, to adopting them as heroes. On February 10th *al-Gomhuriya*'s front page published the pictures of the civilian and police victims who were killed during the demonstrations under the headline "The martyrs of Egypt" (*al-Gomhuriya*, January 10, 2011)³⁴. It was the first time that the paper has used the term 'martyrs' (*shuhada*) for civilians in that context.

³² See for example the case of Yahya al-Gamal, the deputy prime minister of the interim government who was dismissed after attacking the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic movements. Later on he visited the headquarters of their party and expressed his support for their call for democracy.

³³ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/1/28/GM1.pdf>.

³⁴ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/10/GM1.pdf>.

Al-Ahram waited two more days before publishing a full list of the killed, injured and absentees. On that day, *al-Ahram* had dedicated a full page to Wael Ghonim, who was perceived to be the leader of the electronic platform of the revolution. *Al-Gomhuriya* was also quick to embrace Ghonim as a “popular hero that the people are now ready to accept. The people had chosen Wael Ghonim as their spokesman and they have to agree now on a leader that will share in building the country instead of the ruins that we were living in.”³⁵

New vocabulary and dramatic sub-titles like “Here is Tahrir square”, “Egypt first” “Egypt forever” that had decorated the pages’ tops, and embracing the ‘people’s heroes’, like publishing biographies of the martyrs and praising Wael Ghonim, were just the first steps taken by the official press to identify with the revolution. Yet, the revolution as a phenomenon needed yet to be defined in national terms. While the independent press had already defined the process as revolution created by the youth to change the regime, the official press was still lagging behind. Until February 11th, the day of Mubarak’s resignation, the official press was still highlighting the new steps that the government had taken to improve the living conditions. It was busy describing the suggested amendments to the constitution as they were declared by Mubarak, as well as the new employment program and the economic plan that Ahmad Shafiq, the newly appointed prime minister (to be fired later on) offered to the public.

It was in this ‘meantime’ period, that the state-owned press was still not sure how to proceed.

An editorial in *al-Gomhuriya* urged the “Tahrir youth” to establish a political party, “They deserve a party that will express their feelings to the state. They have proven that they are the real power in the Egyptian state. A clean force needs to land in its right place, it needs a constitutional legitimacy”(*al-Gomhuriya*, February 8, 2011).³⁶ There was no demand yet to dismantle the ruling party (this will come soon after Mubarak’s departure), and no vision for a new regime structure. The *national* press could not envision, even in those hectic days, that the old order – and not only the old president – were over, or at least that it should be over. The press was still adopting a paternalistic attitude, recommending what should ‘*shabab al-tahrir*’ do in order to enter the parliament, what kind of slogans they should use (“dialogue not coercion”, “production will build Egypt”), and how to move from the “state of excitement to the state of thinking”. The press was still lecturing to the demonstrators as if they were mere youth that needed guidance from responsible adults who know how the system works. It seems that at this stage the official press did not yet realize, that it was the press that needed legitimization, not the demonstrators.³⁷

³⁵ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/10/GM1.pdf>, p. 5.

³⁶ <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/8/GM1.pdf>, p.1.

³⁷ *Al-Gomhuriya* as well *al-Ahram* had dedicated full pages before February 11th to quoting reactions given by artists and celebrities who generally advised the demonstrators to return home after the “significant achievement”. (see for example <http://www.algomhuria.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/8/GM1.pdf>)

Nevertheless, while the demonstrators were handed with 'advise' by the official press, this press started to draw the line between the 'big event' and the people who have produced it. The 'event' was a national property, which had to be characterized by the state-media that was always responsible for shaping and framing national events. The 'event' had to become part of the new hegemonic discourse, part of the official history, and incorporated into the collective memory. It was not anymore the 'producers' who had to gain legitimacy – they have already got it from the official media – it was as if the revolution itself required a 'formal' legitimacy.

What could be a better way to 'grant' it legitimacy if not by enshrining in the mausoleum of historic events?

In the words of Dr. Wahid Abd al-Magid, director of the al-Ahram Center for Translation and Publication:

“The youth of January 25th revolution should not belittle their big achievement and become prisoners of one slogan or one demand. Because the tunnels that they have opened are not limited to the reforms that have already started, it contains the dissemination of a new spirit in the country. A new spirit that equals the spirit of October.”(*al-Ahram*, February 8, 2011)³⁸.

The 'spirit of October' refers to what is defined as the grand victory over Israel in the October war in 1973, a victory that was depicted by many Egyptian intellectuals not only as a military success but also as a manifestation of the heroic spirit of Egypt and a rectification of the 1967 devastating defeat. The 'spirit of October' is the spirit of national pride. Hence, aligning the revolution with the historic victory puts the revolution in a same historic rank and includes it as an inseparable part of the hegemonic historic discourse. Questioning the revolution would be tantamount then to questioning the October victory.

A more articulate comparison was provided by Muhammad Ali Ibrahim, the editor-in-chief of *al-Gomhuriya* who wrote on February 10th:

"The slogans that the state was spreading and that we have believed were illusionary exactly like what had happened in 1967's defeat...many had dismissed the revolution of 1952 after the naksa [the 1967 defeat] but many remained also with Gamal Abd al-Nasser because the country was facing an ordeal which is similar to that of today. ..However, if we have forgotten June 1967 after the victory of 1973, the generation that is present at Tahrir square does not know October but he will be the off-spring of the January 25th revolution (*al-Gomhuriya*, February 10, 2011)."³⁹

Hence, according to Ibrahim, the January revolution has to play the same role as that of the 1973 victory, to clear the country from its nightmare and to start a new chapter in Egypt's history. Ibrahim, who was a presidential appointee at the *Shura* council (the upper house in the parliament), would be dismissed from his job on

³⁸ http://www.ahram.org.eg/pdf/Zoom_1500/Index.aspx?ID=45354, p.10.

³⁹ <http://www.algomhuriya.net.eg/Archive/pdf/gom/2011/2/10/GM1.pdf>, p. 5.

March 2011, in the wave of reshuffles that the new government was applying. He was replaced by his deputy Mahmud Nafi', thus maintaining the 'old guard' at the helm of the paper.

It should not surprise, then, that Ibrahim would blame the government and not the president, himself or his paper for spreading "illusionary slogans". However, it is interesting that he claims that the generation at Tahrir square "does not know October". This generation, which was brought up on October's collective memory that was disseminated by the hegemonic education system and assisted by the official and private media, could not but live on the 'October spirit' as it was framed by the state.⁴⁰ So why claim otherwise?

One explanation could be that Ibrahim, and his cohorts who write in a similar way, was trying to locate the new revolution in the collective memory of his generation, and to attach his generation to what is happening now in Egypt. Thus binding 'our' generation to 'their' (the youth) generation. 'We' had the October victory; 'they' have the January revolution. Hence, 'we' can understand the revolution only through 'our' symbols.

However, there can be another explanation. The generation that had defined the hegemonic discourse for the regime, is now anxious to keep its monopoly over defining the new hegemonic discourse. In spite of the fact that Ibrahim's generation had attacked the revolutionaries, describing them as hooligans and inciters, and urging them to go home, he has realized that 'they' might be the authors of the new hegemonic discourse. Ibrahim might have felt that he needed to save his, and the rest of the 'state-intellectuals' status, and he did it through a fascinating spin in the very same article:

"The January revolution has proven that the Egyptians will no longer accept any disrespectful attitude from the regime. The last days of Mubarak's regime had laid solid infrastructure for the next president. It is in exactly the same way that Abd al-Nasser had prepared the army to enter the 1973 war. This is what the January revolution has accomplished, any future president will not think of putting a barrier between himself and the people..."

Leaning on the collective memory, the 1967 *naksa* was not a total loss as it had prepared for the 1973 victory, likewise the last 30 years of Mubarak's regime were not simply dictatorial, they were the hothouse of the January revolution, whose function now is to prepare the 'correct' path for the next president.

For Ibrahim it was a useful way to manipulate the collective memory in a way that would keep him and his likes as masters of the hegemonic discourse. At that stage (one day before Mubarak's resignation) Ibrahim was still defining the revolution by using symbols of his own generation. He put it in sequence with other great events, and he began to write prescriptions for the next president (not calling yet

⁴⁰For further analysis of the October war and its place in the Egyptian collective memory see Podeh, E. (2011) *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 88-108; Meital, Y. (2003). Who Is Egypt's "Hero of War and Peace"? The Contest over Representation. *History & Memory*, Volume 15, Number 1, pp. 150-183.

for Mubarak's resignation) and, he did not have any problem with his own, or the state-owned press' legitimacy. On the contrary, he was considering himself and his cohorts as the legitimacy-keepers, who were, and still are, entitled to posit the revolution in its deserved historical location. It is he, and not the demonstrators, who knows where they belong in history and in memory. After all, "they don't know October".

Conclusion: Whose Hegemony?

The future of the state-owned press in Egypt is swinging between various perspectives. Some writers and intellectuals who are employees of those papers, demand their abolition or at least to transform them into private companies. Others, like Yusuf al-Qa'id (*al-Ahram*, March 28th), Manal al-Ghamri (*al-Ahram*, April 5th), Muhammad al- Sa'adani (*al-Ahram* March 3rd) and many others, demand the 'purification' of the official press from its old and corrupt management, and to keep the professional cadres who will have to go through a phase of professional 're-education'. Yet others call for drastic amendments in the press law that will guarantee the freedom of the press, and transform the government-owned press into the "press of the people".

However, these calls for change do not constitute yet an "anti-structure" infrastructure, as Turner defines it. They do, however, signify a liminal stage, where hegemonic structures may (or may not) be stripped of their status. Drawing on the writings of 'state-intellectuals', it is quite clear that a new discourse is being shaped and adopted willingly by the old guard. However, this old guard is anxious to maintain its role as the guardian of legitimacy. For that matter, it is ready to adopt the new vocabulary as it is produced by the revolution, and to repent its mistakes, but it will fight to hold on to its monopoly to locate the revolution in the collective memory and to bestow on the revolution its own definitions, thus cleaning up its own past. This, I would argue, is where the clash of hegemonies is taking place in Egypt of 2011.

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